

CHAPTER 6

ADJUSTING TO DRIVING CONDITIONS



Driving conditions change with the weather, light, or terrain. Study the suggestions below so you can react quickly and properly when driving conditions change.

Night Driving

About 90% of driving choices are based on what you see. At night, your vision is reduced. To make sure you have time to react to danger, always drive slowly enough so you can stop within the distance you can see ahead. This distance is about 350 feet when using the high beams of your headlights, and about 100 feet when using the low beams.

Below are some other tips to make your night driving safer.

- Increase the following distance between your vehicle and the one in front of you.
- Turn on your headlights (not just your parking lights) when driving between sunset and sunrise, or when visibility has been reduced to below 500 feet. The grey hours of twilight and dawn are the most dangerous times of the day.
- Watch for slow-moving or unlighted vehicles, bicycles, pedestrians, and animals.
- Allow more distance and time for passing.
- Don't drive or keep driving if you're tired.
- Never wear sunglasses when light levels are low.
- Keep your windshield clean, both inside and out.
- Keep your headlights clean. Dirt will dim their light and may distort the beam.

- Avoid looking into the headlights of oncoming vehicles. Instead, shift your eyes down to the lower right side of your traffic lane. This keeps the light from hitting your eyes directly.
- Dim your headlights to low beam when approaching or following another vehicle or on lighted roads.
- If you must park on a highway shoulder at night, turn on your emergency flashers or parking lights.

Fog, Smoke, Dust, or Rain

You are required to turn on your headlights in the daytime when vision is reduced to 500 feet or less. Low beams are best at such times. When you first turn on your headlights, be sure they are adjusted to low beams.

It is safest not to drive in fog, dust storms, or in heavy rain. If you must drive during these conditions, reduce your speed. Slow down more when you see red taillights ahead. The car may be stopped or creeping along. If conditions get too bad, pull off the road and stop. Don't creep along; somebody else may crash into you. Also avoid using your four-way flashers while moving—other drivers may think you've stopped.

Rain and Hydroplaning

Wet roads can be as dangerous as icy roads. Always reduce your speed in wet weather. You'll need more distance for stopping and you may skid on quick turns.

Remember, roads are more dangerous at the start of a light rain when road oil and water mix to form a greasy film on the road.

At speeds up to 35 miles per hour, most tires grip the road surface even when it's wet. As speed increases, the tires can't grip the road as well. At 55 miles per hour, the tires may lose all contact with the road. They start to "hydroplane" or ride on top of a film of water like a set of water skis. When that happens, you can't brake, accelerate, or turn. A gust of wind, a curve or even a lane change can cause a skid.

To reduce the chances of hydroplaning, you should:

- Slow down during rainstorms or when roads are slushy.
- Slow down if the road has standing water or puddles.
- Replace tires as soon as they become worn.
- Keep tires properly inflated.

If you are about to drive over a slippery area or you think your car has started to hydroplane:

- Maintain a steady speed and keep moving in a straight line.
- Slowly take your foot off the gas pedal.
- Don't try to stop or turn quickly until your tires are gripping the road again.
- If you have to use your brakes, pump them gently (unless your car has an anti-lock braking system [ABS]).

Flash Floods

Flash floods are caused by intense rain that falls in a short amount of time. Idaho averages seven flash floods a year, and they generally occur during or right after a severe thunderstorm.

In some cases, small streams a few feet wide by a few inches deep can swell to over 12 feet deep and 80 feet wide in less than 5 minutes. To put things in perspective, remember that water is one of the most powerful forces of nature. As little as six inches of fast moving water can knock you off your feet. Fast-moving water two feet deep can wash away a vehicle.

If the National Weather Service issues a Flash Flood Warning, or you observe water rising quickly, you should take action immediately.

- Get far away from areas subject to flooding (dips, low spots, canyons, dry creek beds, or along a stream). Seek higher, safer ground.
- Avoid areas near rivers or streams and areas that are already flooded. Roads that are underwater may no longer be intact. NEVER drive through flooded roadways.
- If your vehicle stalls, leave it immediately and seek higher ground. Rapidly rising water may engulf the vehicle and sweep it away.
- Be very careful at night when it is harder to see flood dangers.
- Do not park your vehicle or camp along streams or dry streambeds during threatening conditions.

Winter Driving

Winter driving calls for special skills. On slippery roads, the keys to safety are slower speeds, gentler stops and turns, and longer following distances. Here are some safe-driving tips that will help you when roads are slick with ice or snow:

- Get the feel of the road by starting out slowly and testing your steering control and braking ability. Avoid spinning your tires when you start by gently pressing your gas pedal until the car starts to roll. Start slowing

down at least three times sooner than you normally do when turning or stopping.

- Use tire chains on very slippery roads.
- When stopping, avoid sudden movements of the steering wheel and pump the brake gently. (Check your vehicle owner's manual, if the vehicle has anti-lock brakes, you may apply steady pressure to the brake pedal.)
- Keep your vehicle in the best possible driving condition. The lights, tires, brakes, windshield wipers, defroster, and radiator are especially important for winter driving.
- Keep your windows clear. Don't start driving until the windows are defrosted and clean—even if you're going only a short distance.
- Watch for slippery spots ahead. Ice may remain on bridges even though the rest of the road is clear. Snow and ice also stick longer in shaded areas.

Getting Stranded During Winter Weather

Idaho winters can be severe, particularly in the mountains. When traveling in winter months, be prepared in case your vehicle breaks down or you get in an accident. Always carry warm clothing and blankets or a sleeping bag. You may need these items if you have to wait for help.

If you get stranded, stay with your vehicle if heavy snow is falling. Most deaths occur when people leave their car, get lost and freeze.

Mountain Driving

Idaho's mountains are beautiful, but they create special problems for drivers. When driving in the mountains, you should:

- Pay special attention to speed limit signs and signs warning of curves, steep hills, or other hazards.
- Stay close to the right edge of the road to be away from oncoming traffic.
- Use a lower gear to control speeds while going down long hills.
- Never coast downhill by shifting into neutral or disengaging the clutch.
- Watch for a solid yellow line in your lane marking a no-passing zone. Sound the horn when approaching any curve on a narrow road where the view is obstructed.

Wildlife Areas

Small animals in the road are dangerous because motorists sometimes lose control while trying to avoid the animals. When you see a small animal in

the road, think of your own safety. Don't try to dodge it unless you're sure it is safe to do so.

Big game animals, such as moose, elk, and deer, can cause severe damage to a vehicle. When you see a large animal on or near the road, slow down and proceed with caution. These are herd animals, and others are usually nearby.

They can move into the path of a vehicle so quickly that it's impossible to slow down enough to safely avoid hitting the animal. In this case, you must consider running over it as the safest alternative, even though the crash may damage your vehicle and will likely kill the animal. Concentrate on keeping control of the vehicle before, during, and after the collision.

Study Questions

1. Why is night driving more dangerous than daytime driving?
2. At night, how can you reduce the problem of glare from the headlights of oncoming vehicles?
3. When driving through heavy daytime fog, should you drive with your headlights on high beam?
4. True or false: In the winter time, it is okay to leave frost on your windshield and windows during short trips.
5. What must you do to reduce the chances of hydroplaning when roads are wet?